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Group Work in the Second Language Classroom: Where teaching meets learning in pedagogic discourse

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Doctor of Education

in the

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March, 2010

Thesis Certification

CERTIFICATION

I, Philip. J. Chappell, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Education, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Philip. J. Chappell

30 March, 2010

Abstract

The central concern of this thesis is the nature and the role of small group work in classrooms where the main educational object is the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. This concern emanated from the author's own teaching praxis whilst engaged as a language teacher, language teacher mentor, language teacher trainer, and member of the main professional association of language teachers in Thailand. As such, this thesis records the author's efforts towards completing a professional doctorate program, which has at its core the following questions: How does small group work contribute to language teaching and learning in an adult, English as a Second Language classroom? How is group work successfully enacted in an adult, English as a Second Language classroom? What roles do the students and the teacher play in the implementation of effective group work?

Although the central concern of the thesis stems from practical pedagogical issues, the focus shifts to theoretical concerns, with a proposed theoretical framework drawing on Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) mediational theory of mind, Halliday's (1978) systemic functional linguistic theory, and Bernstein's (2000) theory of pedagogic communication. Complementarities of these theoretical approaches to human learning and development are established which provide a level of analysis which captures the dynamics of the classroom context in which the group work takes place, thus allowing for comprehensive data to be gathered to enable descriptions and explanations of the nature and the role of group work in the language classroom. Significantly, the dominant theoretical approaches to second/foreign classroom

interaction are critically reviewed, with suggestions for how they would benefit from a shift in emphasis from the individual to the social.

The research is sociogenetic in orientation (Valsiner and van der Veer, 2000), which entails an interpretive, naturalistic approach, adopting principles of ethnography within a compressed time frame. Data comprise video recordings (audio and visual) of all classroom activity over the period of one term, representing a complete curriculum cycle. Data also comprise interviews with the teacher before and after each of the fifteen lessons, field notes, classroom materials, and curriculum documents from the educational institution. The approach to data analysis follows Christie's (2002) curriculum genre/macrogenre model, starting at the longer unit of curriculum macrogenre, then working down to the curriculum genre level, and then discrete segments, or structural elements and phases of lessons, where group work is enacted. The talk is captured holistically by utilising Bernstein's (2000) model of pedagogic discourse, with the talk representing interactions between the teacher and students analysed using systemic functional grammar.

Findings reported include a description of the pedagogic functions of group work revealed in one curriculum macrogenre. Activity directed toward the object of each of these functions represents a variety of interactions all representing intersections of language and cognitive development in the complex milieu of the classroom. An understanding of this milieu involving language and human activity, it is argued, is essential for delving deeply for answers to the central questions focused on the nature and role of group work. The findings also reveal a successful enactment of the foreign language curriculum. This is an exemplar of where an

institute's policy and program has productively recontextualised theory and the policy has in turn been successfully recontextualised by the teacher into effective foreign language teaching practice in the classroom.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not exist without the unceasing commitment of Ross (pseudonym), the teacher who participated in this research. How fortunate I am to have had such an extraordinary teacher to observe so intensively. Ross is a remarkable person in many ways, and his collegiality, friendship and participation over the life of this project and beyond stretched further than I ever expected.

Thanks to my primary supervisor, Dr. Beverly Derewianka, who had faith in me, across the sea, right from the beginning, and who demonstrated a striking ability as a scaffolder, managing contingency support in just the right measures. Thanks, too, to Dr. Honglin Chen, who was there as a secondary supervisor to offer support when needed.

And of course, thanks to the students who, together with Ross, were where all the action was at for this project. They created all the possibilities, and while they have now traversed the roles of young adult English language learners, they are no doubt succeeding in educational and professional contexts where English is the medium of communication. This project is all about creating more of those possibilities, and in its own way creating a slightly more equitable world.

Dedication

The last eight years' efforts and the artefacts that are left behind in their wake are all dedicated to the late John Francis Chappell (1932 to 1994). Dad would have been tickled pink at this.

Chapter 1. The Project's Background, Motivation and Aims.....	15
1.1 Introduction.....	15
1.2 Personal Narrative from Bangkok: The Genesis of the Project.....	16
1.2.1 The Immediate and Surrounding Contexts.....	16
1.2.2 Questioning Student - Student Interaction: Three Perspectives.....	19
1.2.3 Turning to the Literature: SLA's Contribution.....	28
1.2.4 Turning to the Literature: Shifting Fields.....	32
1.2.5 Approaching the Problem through a Doctoral Research Project.....	35
1.3 Theoretical Divides.....	36
1.3.1 From What is Inside the Head to What the Head is Inside.....	36
1.3.2 SLA - Mainstream.....	38
1.3.3 ISLA - Interactionist.....	39
1.3.3.1 Input-Interaction-Output.....	39
1.3.3.2 Language Development in Context.....	40
1.3.4 Building Bridges.....	41
1.3.4.1 Personal Communication.....	43
1.3.4.2 Classroom-based Research.....	44
1.4 Approach to Reporting the Research: Argumentation and Theory Building.....	45
1.4.1 Representing Knowledge: Horizontal and Vertical Discourses and Knowledge Structures.....	45
1.4.2 Knowledge Structures and Knowledge Building in SLA, IIO, and LDC.....	49
1.4.2.1 SLA and Hierarchical Knowledge.....	50
1.4.2.2 Interactionist SLA (ISLA) and Horizontal Knowledge.....	51
1.5 Significance of the Project.....	54
1.6 Research Questions.....	55
1.7 Overview of Thesis.....	55
 Chapter 2. Theoretical Domains of SLA and Theoretical Framework for Language Development in Context.....	 58
2.1 Introduction.....	58

2.2 Second Language Acquisition.....	59
2.2.1 Theoretical and Philosophical Concerns.....	59
2.2.1.1 Rationalism, Positivism and Generativism.....	62
2.2.2 Second Language Acquisition: Methodological Concerns.....	66
2.3 Input- Interaction- Output: Theoretical Concerns.....	67
2.3.1 Acquisition.....	67
2.3.2 Language.....	71
2.3.3 IIO: Methodological Concerns.....	74
2.4 Language Development in Context: Theoretical Concerns.....	78
2.5 Vygotsky's Psychology.....	81
2.5.1 Vygotsky's Mediational Theory of Mind.....	82
2.5.1.1 The Zone of Proximal Development.....	86
2.5.1.2 Bringing the Future into the Present: Prolepsis and Proleptic Instruction.....	90
2.5.1.3 From Interpersonal to Intrapersonal Processes: Internalisation.....	93
2.5.1.4 Imitation as Process of Internalisation: Transforming and personalising the interpersonal.....	95
2.5.1.5 Semiotic Mediation: making meaning in interaction.....	101
2.6 The Internalisation - Externalisation Dialectic: Artefacts and Human Development.....	104
2.6.1 A Social Semiotic Theory of Language.....	105
2.6.1.1 Language, Context and Text.....	106
2.6.1.2 Dialecticality - Intertextuality.....	110
2.7 Sociocultural Level of Analysis: Genre Theory and Curriculum Genres.....	114
2.7.1 Genre Theory.....	114
2.7.1.1 Macrogenre Theory and Curriculum Genres.....	116
2.8 Pedagogic Discourse and Social Relations.....	118
2.9 Summary of the Theoretical Framework	121
 Chapter 3. The Knowledge-Building Literature of Interactionist Second Language Acquisition.....	 122
3.1 Introduction.....	122

3.2 The Input-Interaction-Output Literature.....	122
3.3 Collaborative Language Learning: The Language Development in Context Literature.....	129
3.3.1 Collaboration and Collective Scaffolding in the Zone of Proximal Development.....	130
3.3.2 What Enables or Constrains Successful Collaboration?.....	138
3.3.2.1 Proficiency Level Differences and Collaboration.....	139
3.3.2.2 Students' Orientation to Collaboration.....	144
3.4 Interim Conclusions on Small Group Work: Obscuring Context.....	151
3.5 The Role of Group Work in the Second Language Curriculum.....	155
3.5.1 Benefits of Group Work in the Second Language Classroom.....	155
3.5.2 Problems of Group Work in the Second Language Classroom.....	157
3.5.3 From Activities to Lessons: Where Group Work Fits in the Lesson-as-Curricular Unit.....	159
3.6 Summary and Conclusion: all roads lead to 'context'.....	162
Chapter 4. Research Approach and Design.....	164
4.1 Research Design.....	164
4.1.1 From Paradigmatic to Strategic Concerns.....	164
4.1.2 The Researcher as Instrument.....	166
4.2 Research Strategy.....	167
4.3 The Research Context at the Institute.....	168
4.3.1 The Institutional Context.....	168
4.3.2 The Classroom Context.....	172
4.4 The Research Participants.....	174
4.4.1 The Teacher.....	174
4.4.2 The Students.....	175
4.5 Gathering the Data.....	176
4.5.1 Primary Data.....	177
4.5.2 Secondary Data.....	178
4.6 Analysing the Data.....	178

4.6.1 Curriculum Macrogenres and Curriculum Genres.....	179
4.6.2 Selection of Texts for Analysis.....	181
4.6.3 Linguistic Analysis.....	182
4.6.3.1 Pedagogic Discourse.....	183
4.6.3.2 Experiential Meanings.....	186
4.6.3.3 Interpersonal Meanings.....	190
4.6.3.4 Textual Meanings.....	192
4.6.4 Multimodal Analysis: the Multimodal Semiotic Resource System.....	193
4.7 Summary.....	195

Chapter 5. Analysis and Findings: Pedagogic Discourse, Teaching, Learning and

Group Work.....197

5.1 Introduction.....	197
5.2 Waves and Tidal Cycles of Classroom Activity.....	198
5.3 Identifying Curriculum Genres and Macrogenres.....	201
5.4 The Pedagogic Functions of Group Work: an overview.....	204
5.5 Pedagogic Discourse and the Enactment of Small Group Collaborative Activity.....	209
5.5.1 Building Interpersonal Relations: multimodal analysis of the design of social context.....	210
5.5.2 Building the Field: contexts for collective thinking for the co- construction of knowledge.....	222
5.5.3 Developing Oral Fluency: nurturing the buds of language development in context.....	232
5.5.4 Focusing on Language Form and Function: collaborative pedagogic discourse in microgenesis	240
5.5.5 Focusing on Texts: pedagogic strategies for working with textual meanings.....	250
5.6 The Enactment of Small Group Work: summary of findings.....	260

Chapter 6. Toward a Coherent and Practical Theory of Group Work in the Second Language Classroom.....263

6.1 Orientation: the central problem revisited.....	263
6.1.1 Evolution of the Research.....	263
6.2 The Central Problem Resolved: where teaching meets learning in pedagogic discourse.....	265
6.2.1 The Fundamental Role of Context.....	265
6.2.2 Context within the Unit of Analysis.....	267
6.2.3 Analysing Group Work within the Curriculum Genre.....	268
6.2.3.1 Building Interpersonal Relations: Collaborative Learning Activity.....	269
6.2.3.2 Building the Field: Collective Thinking and the Co-Construction of Knowledge.....	270
6.2.3.3 Developing Oral Fluency: Nurturing the Buds of Development.....	271
6.2.3.4 Focusing on Language Form and Function: Microgenetic Development...272	
6.2.3.5 Focusing on Texts: Working with Textual Meanings.....	273
6.3 A Final Note on Context.....	274
6.4 Implications.....	275
6.5 Intersections of Theory, Policy and Practice: an effective model of communicative language teaching.....	278
6.6 Looking Ahead: potential fields of inquiry.....	280

List of Tables

Table 1.1 Categories of Teachers who Use Group Work at the Institute.....	22
Table 1.2 Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Research.....	38
Table 2.1 Sociolinguistic Influences on IIO's Theory of Language.....	73
Table 4.1 Summary of Data Collection and Analysis Process.....	176
Table 5.1 Functions of Group Work and Relative Strength of Framing in Leisure and Travel Curriculum Genre.....	209
Table 5.2 Dual Task-setting through Regulative Discourse.....	213
Table 5.3 Speech Functions in Congruent and Incongruent Use.....	255

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Hierarchical Knowledge Structure.....	46
Figure 1.2 Horizontal Knowledge Structure.....	47
Figure 2.1 Message Model of Communication.....	72
Figure 2.2 Vygotsky's Basic Mediation Triangle.....	83
Figure 2.3 Relation of the text to the context of situation.....	110
Figure 2.4 The Relations Between Genre, Register and Language.....	115
Figure 3.1 Co-construction of “Tu t’es souvenu”.....	133
Figure 3.2 Speaker 1’s Persistent Imitation.....	134
Figure 3.3 Persistent Imitation: democracy country.....	146
Figure 3.4 Persistent Imitation in Private Speech.....	148
Figure 4.1 Structure of a Curriculum Macrogenre.....	179
Figure 4.2 The Structure of the Curriculum Macrogenre.....	180
Figure 4.3 Relation of the language choices to the context of situation.....	186
Figure 4.4 Process Types.....	187
Figure 4.5 Process Types in Regulative and Instructional Discourse.....	189
Figure 5.1 Waves and Tidal Cycles of Classroom Activity.....	201
Figure 5.2 Curriculum macrogenre: Leisure and Travel Unit of Work.....	203
Figure 5.3 Gaze, Expression, Posture and Gesture realising Interpersonal Relations.....	217
Figure 5.4 Building Social Relations through Playful Teasing.....	219
Figure 5.5 Deconstruction Stage of Task: Building Social Relations.....	220
Figure 5.6 Linguistic Representation of a Collective, Collaborative Activity.....	224
Figure 5.7 Extreme Sports Brainstorming on Whiteboard.....	225
Figure 5.8 Themes Developed During Extreme Sports Activity.....	227
Figure 5.9 Context for Collective Thinking.....	230
Figure 5.10 Instructional and Regulative Registers Converging.....	231
Figure 5.11 Preparation for Intensive Listening Task.....	236
Figure 5.12 Future Aspirations as Reported by Speakers 1 and 2 in Text.....	238
Figure 5.13 Future Aspirations as Reported by Students.....	239
Figure 5.14 Teacher’s Note Taking.....	239

Figure 5.15 Focus on Form: past modals.....	242
Figure 5.16 Tex and Joy Negotiating and Co-constructing Accurate Forms A.....	244
Figure 5.17 Tex and Joy Negotiating and Co-constructing Accurate Forms B.....	247
Figure 5.18 Teacher's Recount of Trip and Expression of Regrets.....	253
Figure 5.19 Setting the Reading Task: Preparing Students to Read.....	257
Figure 5.20 Pairs Collaborate on Task: Maria and Noon.....	258
Figure 5.21 Strongly-framed Focus on Text Semantics Activity.....	260

